Ashes of Greybarrow

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Welcome to Greybarrow

The rain fell like a cold whisper over the stony road, each drop splattering on cloaks already soaked from a long journey. Wren Hollowfall's eyes, sharp and reserved, scanned the half-lit silhouette of the village nestled at the edge of a shadowy forest. The trees behind it rose like skeletal fingers into the gray sky, and the smell of woodsmoke mixed with the coppery tang of damp earth.

Beside her, Tarn Grimbark grumbled and tapped the haft of his hammer against his armored knee. His breath steamed in the chill dusk, and water trickled off the edge of his broad iron helm. "A fine place for secrets," he muttered, eyeing the sagging rooftops and crooked chimneys with visible distaste.

Behind them, Lira Thorne adjusted the folds of her green velvet cloak, fanning out the wet edges to shake off the worst of the water. She smiled toward the dim lantern glow ahead—the only welcoming light in a village that seemed to have closed its shutters to the world. "Or for profits," she purred. "Let's see who's desperate."

The path sloped downward as they reached the first buildings of Greybarrow—worn stone foundations, patched timbers, and windows shuttered tight even before night fully fell. A handful of townsfolk moved like shadows along the main lane, hoods up, eyes down, barely glancing at the newcomers.

Wren slowed. Her hand drifted instinctively to the hilt of one of her shortswords.

The sign for *The Clay Tankard* swung from an iron hook above a door made heavy with nails and old hinges. A carved mug, chipped and soot-darkened, served as the only invitation. Candlelight spilled through the front window, murky and low.

They stepped onto the muddy path leading to the inn—boots squelching in the soft earth. No welcome came from within, only the faint hum of voices and the clatter of a pot being scrubbed.

Wren paused at the door, looking up at the weather-worn sign.

"This town," she said quietly, "feels like it's waiting to be forgotten."

Then she pushed the door open, and the three vanished into the warmth of the inn.

Inside the inn, warmth and ale met them like a curtain. The room was low-beamed and dim, but the hearth blazed, throwing orange light over roughly carved tables and long shadows on the smoke-dark walls. The air smelled of roast onion, damp wool, and old pinewood.

Wren moved quietly to a corner, sliding into a seat that gave her view of the entrance and most of the common room. She loosened her cloak and watched the locals with narrowed eyes—men and women who spoke softly, glanced too often toward the windows, and drank with the heavy silence of those trying to forget something.

At the bar, Tarn Grimbark dropped a silver into the innkeeper's calloused hand with a clink. "Something hot," he said. "And if you've any rumors to sell, I've coin for those too."

Branna, broad-shouldered and middle-aged, poured him stew from a blackened iron pot and replied without looking up. "Coin's good. But there ain't many talking these days."

"I'm not many," Tarn said, with the ghost of a smile.

Lira had already melted into the crowd, weaving her way toward a balding man hunched over a half-finished letter, ink still fresh on his cuff. She slipped beside him with practiced ease, eyes wide with false interest, and laid her charm on thick. Within minutes, she had him laughing, sighing, and confessing things he might not have told his own priest.

Through whispers gathered across the room—some murmured between sips, others mumbled into sleeves—a single name floated to the surface again and again.

Elric.

The miller's son. Missing three nights now. Last seen walking home from his father's barn. Some said wolves had taken him. Others blamed the "Black Wind"—a local superstition older than the stones in the road.

When Wren asked about the boy, Branna approached their table with a wooden platter of black bread and thick stew. "You'll want to speak to Joren," she said, setting the food down with care. "Lives near the old well, past the baker's lane. Claims he heard the lad scream, just after the bells rang out."

Tarn looked up. "Bells?"

"Clock tower rings every dusk, same as it ever did," Branna said. "But folk say it's been ringing a little… strange lately. Slower. Hollow. Like something's wrong in the gears."

She turned, then hesitated. "And you three—if you're stayin' the night, keep your window shut. The wind's been… odd."

Lira returned just then, brushing a strand of red-black hair behind one horn as she slid into the seat beside Wren. In her hand, she held a folded slip of parchment, pinched between two fingers like a prize.

"Drunk old scribe was writing a letter to someone he owes," she whispered. "Mentions the crypt under the chapel. Sealed thirty years ago. And get this—he says it's not *empty*."

Wren took a slow bite of bread, chewing without looking away from the door.

"I don't think anything in this town is."

Morning brought clearer skies, but no warmth. A pale sun hung like an afterthought over the rooftops of Greybarrow, casting long, skeletal shadows across frost-slick cobblestones. Smoke rose from only half the chimneys, and the village had the feel of something paused—between breath, between days, between life and what comes after.

The eastern well sat at the edge of the village proper, where the land sloped slightly and the trees gathered close like gossiping old men. It was ringed in mossy stone and banded by rusted iron. The only sound was the creak of rope and the distant hush of wind stirring the trees.

Old Joren stood nearby, hunched and draped in a patched cloak. His walking stick thudded into the dirt with each slow step, and his eyes—pale and clouded with age—stared through the morning air as though remembering something he wished he could forget.

“Heard it,” he rasped, his voice thin but sharp. “Midnight. Boy screamed, high and sharp. Like something pulled down hard. Then… silence.”

He pointed with a bony finger toward the stones. “Didn’t see it. Don’t see much anymore. But it weren’t no wolf that made that sound.”

Wren crouched beside the well. Her fingers traced the weather-worn lip, stopping at a frayed length of rope dangling limply from the edge. Nearby, small scratches marred the stone. Not jagged like claws, but neat—like a blade or tool had scraped along during a struggle.

She looked up. “Elric didn’t fall. He was taken.”

A soft sound drifted from the shaft below—a low moan, barely audible. Faint, like wind, but… heavier.

Tarn stepped forward. His hammer hung on his back, but in his hand he now held a bronze symbol, old and plain: the mark of Moradin. He lifted it slightly over the well’s edge and whispered a prayer in dwarvish.

The sound ceased instantly.

Wren raised an eyebrow. Tarn’s mouth was a hard line.

“Something didn’t like that,” he said.

Lira tugged her gloves tighter and stepped forward. “Give me a rope. I’ll take a peek.”

Wren looked at her flatly. “You sure?”

Lira was already tying the rope around her waist. “Of course not.”

She lowered herself down into the dark, her boots scraping stone as she descended. The well shaft was narrow and damp, lined with slick moss and cold air. Ten feet down, a small ledge jutted out, and something gleamed faintly beside it—half-buried in mortar.

Lira leaned closer. The stone was marked—an old symbol carved deep into its face: an eye, lidless and watching, with a downward-pointing tear carved beneath it. Unlike the other stones, this one was misaligned, as if deliberately forced out of place.

She touched it lightly.

And somewhere beneath her feet, stone *shifted*.

They returned to the well after sunset.

The villagers had all gone to ground, doors barred, windows shuttered, the whole town held in a breathless silence that deepened with the night. Under a moon thin as a blade, the trio descended—Wren first, then Tarn, Lira last—each slipping past the loose stone marked with the carved eye. It opened not to a shaft, but a sloped passage, choked with roots and slick with age.

The tunnel narrowed as it slanted downward, carved by hands long gone. Damp clung to every surface, and the air carried the scent of stale incense and buried time. Eventually, the path spilled into a low chamber of worked stone, choked in dust and silence.

Along the walls, cracked murals peeled like skin from ancient frescoes—scenes of robed priests, their faces serene, bearing symbols of radiant light and heavy chains. They walked in procession toward a stylized sun above a door now long collapsed. One priest's face had been scraped away violently.

The party stepped carefully, their torchlight throwing dancing shapes against the walls.

Then came the voice.

A whisper—so soft it felt like breath across their ears.
"Return what you stole…"

Wren's bow was already in hand. Tarn raised his holy symbol. Lira flipped a dagger between her fingers, eyes scanning the darkness.

They came not from shadows, but *as* shadows—coalescing along the walls, dripping from the ceiling like ink. Three figures, vaguely human, their eyes hollow voids, limbs long and clawed, reaching hungrily.

One lunged. Wren loosed an arrow—straight through it. The thing recoiled but did not fall.

Tarn stepped forward, his voice a ringing echo in the chamber. "Back to the dark with you!" he shouted, Moradin's light flaring from his symbol. One shadow wailed—a high, unnatural keen—and recoiled into the wall.

The other two circled. Lira darted between them, her feet quick on the broken floor. She drove a silver-edged dagger through one's chest. It hissed and writhed, the form trembling violently before scattering like fog.

The last surged toward Tarn, claw grazing his cheek—his skin paled, and his breath caught. Wren's second arrow struck true, and the creature dissolved into ash and silence.

Their breath filled the chamber again.

The shadows were gone.

They found the old altar soon after, beneath a blanket of dust and dried petals. A bowl lay atop it, tarnished and copper. Inside: thirty gold coins, dulled with age. Wren looked once and turned away.

“Grave gold,” she said.

Tarn took ten, reluctantly. “We’ll need food,” he muttered.

Lira didn’t ask. She took the rest and pocketed it before anyone could object.

Beside the bowl, half buried in old wax and soot, lay a singed scroll. The words had faded to ash, but two remained, etched in a darker ink.

Below waits…

No one spoke for a long time.

Then Wren said softly, “We’re not done.”

And from deeper in the earth, something unseen exhaled.

The Well That Whispers

The fire in *The Clay Tankard* crackled low, throwing orange light across half-drunk mugs and sleepless eyes. The common room had emptied early, the locals retreating behind their bolted doors long before midnight. Only Branna remained behind the bar, drying mugs and watching the adventurers with quiet concern.

Wren sat nearest the hearth, her cloak draped over her shoulders, damp from the descent. She stared into the flames, but her thoughts were far below the village. Her hand toyed with a splintered arrow shaft, rolling it between her fingers.

“They looked like... shapes I knew,” she muttered. “My brother used to draw things like that. From dreams. Always reaching. Always whispering.”

Tarn sat opposite her, a leather-bound tome cracked open on the table. His thick fingers turned brittle pages lined with dwarvish script and faded ink. He’d scratched several quick notes in the margin—symbols for incorporeal entities, residual hauntings, and protective rites.

“Shadows, yes,” he grunted. “But not born of light. These were old. Starved. Possibly cursed. This crypt might’ve been sealed for a reason no one bothered to remember.”

Lira leaned back, perched on the bench with her feet up on the edge of the hearth. She sipped lazily from a mug of weak wine and watched the other two with mild curiosity. “Could’ve just been grave magic. Some leftover spite tied to whatever this ‘Below’ thing is.”

Wren looked up sharply. “You think this is common?”

“I think places like Greybarrow bury their sins in stone, then pretend the earth doesn’t settle,” Lira replied.

Tarn scratched his beard. “The stone marked with the eye—that symbol was used by certain faiths to warn of divine punishment. Usually when someone’s bound to something… unpleasant.”

Wren didn’t respond. Her thoughts returned to the whisper: *Return what you stole...*

She whispered back, “But what if we don’t even know what was taken?”

Outside, the wind picked up again, sliding cold fingers beneath the eaves.

Branna approached then, wiping her hands on a cloth. “If you’re planning to poke deeper,” she said, voice low, “you’d best see the old chapel. Been sealed since the ground caved in years ago. But before that, the priests—” she hesitated, “—they warned about the well, too.”

Wren stood. Her bow leaned against the wall, already in hand before she finished the thought.

“We go at dawn.”

Morning came slow and gray, a thick mist clinging to Greybarrow’s narrow streets. The kind that softened edges and stole voices. The townsfolk moved with the quiet urgency of people pretending nothing was wrong.

The chapel sat at the village's edge, beyond a crumbling stone wall and a crooked gate more rust than iron. Its steeple had partially collapsed, and one of its bells lay shattered in the grass. The front doors were boarded over with planks darkened by rain and old rot, nailed shut with crude iron spikes. Above the lintel, the symbol of a broken sun had been scratched nearly smooth.

Tarn ran a hand over the wood, muttering a brief blessing. “This wasn’t sealed by masons,” he said. “This was done in a hurry. And not with reverence.”

Lira had already disappeared into the village records hall—a squat, mildew-stained building that smelled like vinegar and ink. She moved like a ghost among the stacks, lifting ledgers and skimming faded parchment under the nose of the snoring clerk.

In a brittle binder of property holdings and construction permits, she found it: a single line, written in cramped script.

“Sanctuary sealed per Order of Council following shaft collapse. Divine assets unrecovered. One life unaccounted: Brother Hiram.”

She smiled and slipped the note into her satchel before slipping out.

Meanwhile, Tarn made his way to the graveyard behind the chapel, where headstones tilted like drunks and the grass grew in tangles. There he found the gravedigger—a thin, wiry man

with a limp and a face like boiled leather. His name was Henlick, and he didn't speak much unless paid.

Tarn offered two silver. Henlick spit on one and bit the other.

"They never recovered the priest," he rasped. "Said he was prayin' down below when it happened. Big crack opened under the altar, so the stories go. No one went in after. Just sealed it. Hiram's stone's out there... but there's no bones under it."

Back at the inn, Wren wandered the square and spoke with a few wary villagers. Most had nothing useful to say. A few wouldn't speak at all.

But an older woman mending nets by the dry well offered something more.

"He wasn't right after the dreams," she said, eyes distant. "Brother Hiram. Always scribblin'. Said the light was going cold underground. Said we shouldn't sing near stone anymore."

Wren asked what happened after.

The woman looked away. "Then the mine fell in. And the sun never came back to that chapel."

The sun had dipped behind the trees by the time they returned to the ruined chapel, armed with pry bars, torches, and growing certainty.

Wren found the entrance first—a narrow door sunken beneath the rear of the chapel, nearly swallowed by bramble and earth. A rusted iron lock held it fast. The surrounding stone bore faint carvings, mostly eroded, but one phrase remained etched above the lintel: *"Let silence keep what light abandoned."*

Lira knelt by the door, her tools out in moments. "Crude lock," she muttered. "But it's not about keeping thieves out—it's about keeping something in."

She popped the lock. The door creaked inward, revealing a short stairwell that descended into shadow.

They lit torches and stepped inside.

The crypt was narrow, the ceiling arched low, supported by half-collapsed columns and the weight of forgotten years. Dust clung to the air, thick and fibrous, swirling like ash with every step. Along the walls lay niches filled with old bones wrapped in linen, some marked with the broken sun, others bare. A single door stood at the far end, partially open, its hinges groaning under their own age.

Beyond it lay a circular chamber. The walls bore faded murals, still barely visible by torchlight—scenes of chains forged and clasped by robed figures, celestial beings turning away, a sun darkened at its center.

At the center of the room knelt a skeletal figure in ceremonial robes, hunched forward in eternal prayer. Its bones were pristine, untouched by decay or dust. Its hands were still clasped, knuckles locked together around a rusted chain.

Then the whispering began.

Soft, rhythmic—chant-like. Not speech, but memory, echoing off the stones.

Tarn stepped forward, holy symbol in one hand, eyes narrowing. He strained to listen, and slowly, the syllables found meaning.

"…bound by oath… broken in silence… chains broken by truth denied…"

He stepped back, face pale.

"They swore to keep something sealed. And one of them… broke the vow."

Wren circled the chamber, her fingers brushing over the murals, following the arc of one broken chain painted in red ochre. "This wasn't a burial chamber. It was a warning."

"And maybe a prison," Lira added.

From beneath the altar behind the skeleton, a draft stirred. Cold. Wrong.

Something still lived down here. Or remembered how.

The silence broke with a dry *snap*—a sound like old twigs cracking beneath weight.

The robed skeleton shifted. Not in a natural way. Not like something waking, but like a puppet pulled by threads long buried. Its head turned, and its jaw fell open—not in a scream, but in a long, breathless hiss.

Behind the group, another skeleton lurched from a recessed niche, bits of linen still clinging to its limbs. Its empty eye sockets burned faintly with a blue-white glow.

Wren reacted instantly, arrow nocked and loosed in a single motion. The shaft drove clean through the robed figure's skull, shattering it into bone dust. The body crumpled beside the altar, fingers still locked in prayer.

But the second skeleton was faster than it looked. It lunged at Lira, its bony hand swiping with rusted fingernails.

She ducked beneath the swing, rolling past with a flourish and kicking a stone candleholder toward it as she moved. "You want me," she hissed, drawing its focus away from Tarn.

Tarn stepped in behind her, hammer raised.

"Return to rest," he muttered—and brought the weapon down in a brutal arc.

Bone splintered on stone. The skeleton collapsed in a heap of dust and iron rings, motionless once more.

They waited, breath held, but no more rose.

In the stillness that followed, Lira crouched beside the first figure's remains. Its hands, still clenched even in defeat, held a tarnished silver symbol—an ancient holy medallion shaped like a rising sun behind a closed gate.

She picked it up, weighed it in her hand. The silver had gone dark, nearly black at its edges, but it still shimmered faintly beneath the soot. "Worth something," she said, half to herself.

Wren stepped forward but stopped short. Her eyes lingered on the medallion, brow furrowed.

"Don't," she said quietly. "It doesn't belong to us."

Tarn took it gently from Lira and slipped it into a cloth wrap. "It may yet have a use," he said. "But it shouldn't be sold."

Lira shrugged. "Suit yourselves."

From deeper in the chamber, behind the altar, came another whisper—not words, but a sensation, like memory pressing against skin.

Tarn lifted his torch. A narrow tunnel stretched downward, hidden until now. Old stone steps vanished into black, and the air that rose from below smelled of dust, rot, and something… sweet.

Wren turned from the crypt. "We need to know what they sealed."

Tarn nodded slowly.

Lira smiled. "Then let's go see what the truth was worth hiding."

Trail of the Lost

They left Greybarrow at first light, the village shrinking behind them like a fading dream. Clouds hung low, casting the dense forest ahead in a dreary half-light. A narrow game trail, barely visible through thickets of blackthorn and pine, led toward the hills where Elric had last been seen.

Wren moved at the front, crouching low, eyes constantly scanning the forest floor. "Here," she said softly, pointing to a strip of torn cloth snagged on a bramble. Faded brown—coarse linen. "Matches the miller's work shirts."

Further along: broken branches at shoulder height. Drag marks, too shallow to suggest panic, but too erratic for a simple walk. Tarn muttered a prayer under his breath, eyes wary. Lira walked in silence, her boots careful on the leaf-cloaked ground, ears tuned for more than animals.

By dusk, they found a dry ridge beneath an overhang of mossy stone. They made a small fire, tight and smokeless, and laid out simple rations. Wren set a trip line; Tarn tended the fire; Lira cleaned her blade while pretending not to watch the trees.

Then the howls began.

Low at first—distant, almost thoughtful. Then louder. Too long, too steady. And too many. Wolves, yes—but something wasn't right. One call answered another, then overlapped. Echoes from places no living pack would gather.

Wren tensed. "That's not natural. Wolves don't hunt like this."

Tarn checked his holy symbol, fingers running across the engraving as if ensuring it hadn't changed.

Lira looked up at the canopy, her voice calm but low. "Whatever we're following… it isn't just a lost boy anymore."

The wind shifted.

Somewhere deeper in the woods, a branch snapped—not fallen, but crushed.

They doused the fire and waited.

Sleep, when it came, was thin and haunted.

By morning, the howls had stopped. Not faded—stopped, as if cut off by some unseen hand. The forest was quiet now, but it was not peace they felt. It was tension.

Wren led them further into the woods, eyes scanning for broken twigs, displaced moss, or anything out of rhythm. Just before noon, she paused near a clearing where the trees thinned, and a moss-covered structure rose from the underbrush like a broken tooth.

"A watchtower," Tarn observed. "Old. Imperial stonework. Likely abandoned after the mines collapsed."

Wren knelt at the edge of the clearing. "Tracks. More than one set—humanoid. Two pairs of boots, maybe three. Moving around the tower... but not toward it."

She pointed. The prints circled, never approaching directly. One set dragged something. "No signs of a struggle here," she added. "But someone wanted it to look that way."

Lira crouched beside a scuffed patch of ground. A splash of dried blood had been artfully smeared beside a torn leather strap.

“Deliberate,” she muttered. “Someone wanted us to follow this path.”

Tarn glanced at the tower. “A trap?”

“Or bait,” Wren replied.

The watchtower itself loomed just ahead—its upper floor collapsed, ivy gripping its flanks like fingers. A rusted lantern hung from the archway above its entrance, and faint smoke curled from somewhere inside.

Lira stepped lightly back into the trees. “If someone’s home, they’re not bandits,” she said. “They’re actors.”

Wren’s hand went to her bow. “Then let’s not be an easy audience.”

The tower’s interior was dark and damp, the stone floor cracked with age and tangled in creeping moss. A half-collapsed stairwell led nowhere, and the ceiling above had fallen in decades ago. The light filtering through the ruined roof made the place feel like a mausoleum that had forgotten its purpose.

Inside, three figures huddled near a pitiful campfire—two men and a woman, dressed in dirt-streaked cloaks and threadbare boots. They looked up as the party entered, flinching as if startled.

“You’re not from the village,” the woman said quickly, rising to her feet. She was young, early twenties maybe, with wild dark hair and eyes that shifted too often.

“We’re looking for Elric,” Wren said flatly, bow still in hand but lowered. “Miller’s son. Disappeared near here.”

The taller man stood, rubbing one arm. “He ran ahead. Stupid kid. Something spooked him, and we got separated in the dark. We’ve been stuck here since—wolves, maybe worse out there.”

“You’re survivors?” Tarn asked.

The third figure, a squat man with an uneven beard, nodded rapidly. “Three days now. We thought no one was coming. Thank the gods you found us.”

Tarn said nothing at first. He stepped to one side, murmuring a prayer under his breath, his holy symbol pressed subtly to his palm. As he opened his senses, the world around him seemed to shift—colors dulled, and the warmth of the fire dimmed.

He felt it. Faint—but real. An aura. Flickering like smoke behind the taller man, lingering around the woman like a stain she couldn’t scrub away.

Not infernal. Not undead. Just... intent.

He narrowed his eyes. “You carry something false with you.”

The woman stiffened. “What?”

Wren’s fingers tightened around her bowstring.

Lira raised an eyebrow and casually leaned against the wall. “Well now,” she said. “Let’s not skip to the final act just yet.”

Tarn spoke calmly, but his voice was iron. “You’re not just travelers. Who are you really?”

There was a long pause. Then the tall man smiled—too slow, too wide.

“Doesn’t matter now, does it?”

The shift was instant.

The tall man lunged for a blade hidden in the firewood pile, while the woman swept back her cloak to reveal a shortbow already strung. The bearded one dove for a dagger tucked in his boot, snarling curses.

Wren moved faster.

Her bow came up and loosed a shot into the tall man’s thigh. He staggered, dropped his blade, and crashed backward over the embers, sending sparks hissing into the dark.

Lira was already behind the archer, one hand slipping under her arm and twisting sharply—bow clattered to the floor, useless. The woman shrieked, tried to wrench free, and earned a knee to the ribs for the effort.

The bearded bandit managed a swing at Tarn, nicking the dwarf’s cheek.

Tarn responded with a hammer strike to the gut that left the man folded on the floor, gasping like a fish on a dock.

It ended quickly.

Wren stood over the tall man, breathing hard. He was maybe seventeen, barely a man, with hunger in his face and blood on his hands. He held up both arms, eyes wide, and choked out, “We didn’t mean… it’s just—folk go missing all the time out here. No one comes looking…”

Wren didn’t lower her bow. She didn’t fire either.

“They’ll live,” Tarn said, checking the fallen for wounds. “They weren’t ready for a fight.”

Lira crouched by the extinguished fire and pulled a small leather pouch from beneath a loose stone. She jingled it once—gold coins inside. Twenty, no more. Just enough to make the risk seem worth it.

“Loot,” she said flatly. “Roll was poor. Their plan was worse.”

She tossed the pouch on the floor near Tarn’s pack and stood. “What’s next?”

Wren finally turned away from the boy. Her voice was quiet. “We keep following the real trail.”

But her gaze lingered a little too long.

And that night, she said nothing at all.

Smoke and Iron

The trail led deeper into the hills, where the trees gave way to charred stumps and old stone terraces once carved for mining. The air grew warmer with each step, and though clouds still cloaked the sun, the ground felt dry beneath their boots—brittle, as if baked from within.

Nestled in a ravine they found it: the ruined smithy of Greybarrow’s lost forge.

The structure was mostly collapsed—its walls crumbled and roof bowed under years of neglect—but the great stone chimney still stood like a monument, smoke curling from it in slow, steady wisps.

Wren frowned. “No one’s been out here for years. That fire shouldn’t be burning.”

Tarn stepped forward, eyes fixed on the forge mouth. A dull glow pulsed faintly from inside, though there was no wood, no coal—only a bed of cracked stone and the distant hum of heat.

He moved as if pulled.

The closer he drew, the more he felt it: something in the forge called to the blood in his bones. Not words, not memory—but craft. Flame. Steel. The raw echo of the Forgefather’s domain, twisted into something unnatural.

“Stand back,” he said, barely above a whisper. “This was made by dwarven hands… but something else has claimed it.”

Lira circled the exterior, blade loose in her hand. “Any chance this is just haunted by poor maintenance?”

Wren checked the ground—no fresh tracks, but the soil was cracked and blackened in a radius around the hearth.

“No animals have come near this place,” she said. “Whatever this heat is… it doesn’t belong here.”

Tarn knelt before the forge, placing his hammer gently on the stone floor. He whispered a prayer—not for power, but recognition.

The flames inside flared in response.

And something moved in the coals.

The forge roared suddenly, the glow turning white-hot.

Tarn stumbled back as the coals shifted, split, and rose—no longer embers but limbs, wings, a snarl of flame and claw. A creature of smoke and fire twisted free from the hearth, coalescing into a squat, sharp-jawed form with jagged wings and ember eyes.

A fire mephit, its grin wide and crackling.

It shrieked in *Primordial*, the words alien and harsh:
"This fire is *ours*! Begone, shapers! Begone!"

Wren's arrow struck it mid-chant, but the shaft burst into flame on contact. The mephit howled, diving toward her with claws trailing sparks. Tarn intercepted, hammer sweeping wide, smashing one wing and knocking it sideways into the soot-blackened wall.

Lira darted behind it, her dagger flashing once, then twice—each strike sending jets of steam where metal kissed fire.

The mephit erupted in a final shriek and exploded in a burst of flame and smoke, the blast hot enough to scorch Wren's sleeve and knock Tarn back a step. Ash rained down like bitter snow.

They caught their breath as the forge dimmed—still warm, but no longer alive.

Tarn picked up a twisted iron rod from the forge floor. "It was nesting in the coals," he murmured. "Feeding on old heat. That thing… it wasn't just fire. It remembered."

Wren nodded toward the hills. "Then we're not the first to come through here. And we won't be the last."

But even as the last embers died, they heard something else—far off, carried on the breeze:

The sound of stone grinding beneath weight.

Something—or someone—had heard the battle.

And it was coming.

The forge cooled slowly, though the air still shimmered faintly above the hearthstone.

Wren kept watch at the broken doorway, arrow nocked, her ears tuned to the wind. Tarn knelt by the hearth again, running a gloved hand over the now-settled coals, whispering prayers of sealing—not to banish what had been there, but to honor the craft it defiled.

Lira, ever curious, poked through what remained of the forge's back room—a stone-walled chamber half-collapsed, buried under splintered beams and blackened tools. Beneath a fallen workbench, she found a thick leather roll tied in waxed cord.

Blueprints.

She unrolled the sheets carefully on a nearby anvil, brushing off flakes of charcoal. Each page bore diagrams of hammers, hinges, a strange gear design she didn't recognize—and then, in the corner of one plan, a marking: a dwarven rune.

A circle crossed with an anvil and hammer. She'd seen it once before—etched into the side of Tarn's weapon.

"Tarn," she called, holding it out. "These were made by someone you know?"

Tarn approached, eyes narrowing. He traced the rune with a reverent finger.

"My old forge-master," he said quietly. "This was his seal. But… he vanished years ago. No word. No trail."

He turned the sheet. "These aren't weapons. These are keys. Lock mechanisms—ritual locks."

At that, Wren stepped inside, gesturing toward the hearth. "Then maybe you'd best look under your legacy."

A fracture had opened beneath the base of the forge—subtle, hidden by years of soot and ash. Now, in the stillness, a faint red glow leaked from it like a heartbeat.

They cleared the debris and exposed the edges of a pit—no more than three feet wide but deeper than they could see. Warm air rose from it, dry and tinged with something metallic.

"Another descent," Lira murmured, peering into the dark.

Tarn clenched the blueprint in his hand. "And one step closer to what they sealed."

The narrow shaft descended into darkness, carved smooth and steep, its walls streaked with soot and the scent of scorched copper. One by one, they climbed down using old iron rungs set into the stone, their boots slipping occasionally on slag and ash.

The chamber below was a ruined undercroft—perhaps once a storage cellar or hidden workspace. Now, it resembled a kiln left to burn too long.

Melted tools lay fused to the floor. An anvil half-swallowed by hardened slag sat in the corner like a drowned idol. The walls shimmered with residual heat, and in one corner, bones —warped, blackened, half-embedded in stone—spoke of someone who hadn't made it out.

"Dwarf," Tarn said quietly, kneeling beside the remains. "From the size of the bones… maybe an apprentice."

Wren moved cautiously, eyes scanning for movement. Lira poked at the far wall with a sheathed dagger, noting where stone had melted, not cracked.

Then the heat shifted.

From the pile of fused debris near the forge's heart, a glow brightened—red to orange to searing white. A shape uncurled from the slag like a newborn thing—molten, twitching.

A magmin, half-formed and hungry.

It lunged.

Wren's first arrow struck its chest and burst into flame. Lira flanked it instantly, dancing through the heat to land a blade beneath its glowing jaw. Tarn stepped forward, hammer in hand, and brought it down with a thunderous crack.

The creature exploded into sparks, a pulse of searing air rushing through the chamber. They hit the floor as a wave of molten slag belched upward—then cooled in seconds, hissing into black glass.

In the wake, Tarn sifted through the wreckage.

Coins—old, twisted, partially melted—lay scattered among the bones. Greybarrow mint, long since out of use. More symbolic than spendable, but gold nonetheless.

He counted it silently: forty gold pieces, broken into half-melted fragments.

Wren turned away from the bones, voice low. "They weren't hoarding treasure. They were making something. Feeding it."

Tarn pocketed the slagged coins. "And whatever it was… they failed to contain it."

Cold Company

The trio returned to Greybarrow in silence, the forge's glow still fresh in their minds. By the time they reached the village square, dusk was falling again, and a fine, cold mist clung to the cobbles like breath not quite exhaled.

Outside *The Clay Tankard*, a girl waited.

She couldn't have been more than ten—thin, pale, with straw-colored hair tied back in a fraying red ribbon. Her cloak was too big, her boots mismatched, and she flinched when Wren met her gaze.

“You’re the ones looking into things,” the girl said, voice just above a whisper. “The innkeep said you went to the forge.”

Lira leaned down, hands on her knees. “We go where we’re needed. What’s your name, darling?”

“Lysa,” she said, glancing at Tarn, then back to Wren. “My sister’s grave. It’s… someone dug it up.”

The words hit harder than they should have.

Wren knelt, her expression softening. “When did this happen?”

“Last night, I think. I go see her sometimes—just to talk. I found the dirt scattered, and her little stone marker cracked. Papa said not to tell anyone. Said she’s gone and best left that way.”

Wren reached out and took the girl’s hand—cold, small, trembling.

“What was her name?”

“Maela,” Lysa said. “She died last winter. Fever took her. But now… it’s like something’s *wrong* where she’s buried. Please. You don’t have to tell anyone. Just… fix it.”

Tarn and Lira exchanged a glance.

Wren stood. “We’ll go tonight.”

Lysa nodded once and ran into the fog, swallowed by the growing dark.

Wren didn’t move.

Lira waited a beat before speaking. “You think this is connected?”

“No,” Wren said, voice quiet. “I think this is personal.”

And that was reason enough.

The graveyard lay on a low hill east of the chapel ruins, surrounded by leaning iron fences more rust than rail. The gate swung open with a groan, though no wind touched it. The moment the party stepped inside, the air turned colder—unnaturally so.

Snow drifted down in fine flakes, whispering over the stones in pale silence. It was spring in Greybarrow. There shouldn’t have been snow.

“Too cold,” Tarn muttered, breath fogging before him. “This isn’t weather. It’s presence.”

Wren pulled her cloak tight and stepped between the crooked markers. Each grave seemed to lean toward her, like heads bowed in judgment. “This place remembers,” she said softly.

Lira crouched by a row of small plots near the north fence. “Here,” she called, brushing frost from the grass. “Someone’s disturbed the ground. Not just Lysa’s sister—look.”

Fresh dirt was piled *beside* the graves, not atop. Carefully shoveled, as if whoever did it was more concerned with *getting in* than hiding it afterward.

Wren joined her, eyes narrowing. “The graves weren’t dug up with force. Whoever did this… they were careful. Quiet. Respectful, almost.”

“Or practiced,” Lira added.

A cold gust passed through them, and every branch above groaned in unison.

Tarn walked among the graves, hand on his holy symbol. “No wildlife. No rot. Just quiet. The wrong kind.”

Lira stood and glanced up at the falling snow. “I don’t think we’re alone anymore.”

From the treeline, a soft crunch echoed. Something had stepped where snow had not yet fallen.

They worked in silence, scraping through the frozen earth with care. Wren used her hunting knife; Tarn, a rusted spade found near the chapel wall. Lira stood watch, eyes flicking from stone to shadow, one hand resting lightly on her hilt.

It didn’t take long.

Maela’s grave gave way too easily—soil looser than it should’ve been, packed from the top but hollow beneath. The small coffin was there, wood swollen and warped. The lid had been cracked—not broken from above, but *from inside*.

Wren’s breath caught in her throat.

Beneath the grave, a cavity yawned open. Not natural erosion. A tunnel, narrow and damp, led down into the earth. Clumps of root hung from the ceiling like veins. The smell that rose from below was bitter, sweet, and *wrong*.

Tarn knelt beside the hole. His torch cast flickering light down the shaft, revealing the stone walls below.

Scratched.

No—*scored*.

Four deep, jagged lines marred the stone. Each swipe was deliberate, powerful, gouging into the very bedrock.

“Claws,” Tarn muttered. “Something… hungry. This was dug from beneath, not above. Something took her.”

Wren was already lowering herself toward the edge, fingers tense. “Whatever it was, it’s still close. You feel it, don’t you?”

Lira nodded. “There’s no wind down there, but something’s breathing.”

A sound rose from below—not a growl, not a voice.

A rasp.

Wet. Hollow. *Waiting.*

The first ghoul burst from the tunnel with a shriek, claws raking through the earth like knives. Its eyes gleamed with a feral, mindless hunger—its face twisted in a rictus grin of rot and broken teeth.

Then three more followed, crawling from graves like worms from meat.

Tarn raised his holy symbol high. “Back, carrion!” he bellowed, voice ringing with dwarven authority. A wave of radiant force surged from him, washing over the graveyard in a pulse of gold and white.

One ghoul screamed, clutching its face as if burned. It turned and fled, clawing through gravestones in its mad retreat.

But the others came on.

Wren rolled to one knee, loosing an arrow at the nearest—striking its shoulder but not slowing it. It lunged, jaws snapping. She ducked, drew her shortsword, and in a fluid motion, drove it up beneath the creature’s chin and through the back of its skull. It collapsed in a twitching heap.

Lira danced between two others, daggers flashing. One raked her shoulder, tearing cloth and drawing blood, but she spun, kicked off a headstone, and planted a blade between its ribs. It shrieked and twisted as she wrenched the weapon free.

The final ghoul lunged at Tarn, but the dwarf caught it with the haft of his warhammer and brought it down with a crushing blow, cracking ribs and spine in a single, reverberating strike.

The graveyard fell silent again, save for the crunch of settling earth and Wren’s ragged breath.

Tarn wiped his hammer clean and knelt to check the ghouls. “These weren’t fresh,” he said. “They’ve been dead a long time. Someone—or something—is raising them.”

Lira crouched beside the largest ghoul, patting down its grimy, tattered satchel. She pulled out a small pouch containing 10 gold pieces, the coins old but spendable.

“Grave robber’s purse,” she said lightly.

As Tarn turned away, Lira slipped something else from the ghoul's neck—a delicate silver locket, its clasp bent, its chain snapped. She said nothing, tucking it into her cloak with a glance toward Wren.

Wren stared down at the broken coffins.

"She wasn't taken," she said softly. "She *rose*. And she wasn't the only one."

The snow began falling harder.

The Pact Stone

Greybarrow stirred uneasily the next morning, as if the town itself had taken a breath it didn't dare release.

At *The Clay Tankard*, a quiet voice emerged from the crowd of early drinkers and bleary-eyed tradesmen—a carpenter's apprentice who'd seen them return covered in grave dust and blood.

"You're chasing the wrong end of the stories," he murmured, eyes flicking toward the windows. "If you want answers, you need to find the green witch."

Tarn set his mug down with a slow weight. "Witch?"

The boy shook his head. "She's a healer. Lives out near the thornwood glade. People say she *cures* madness. Brings back what's lost. She knows things no one should."

"Has a name?" Wren asked.

"They call her *Mother Verna*. Don't know if that's her real one. But she's older than she looks, and the woods don't touch her."

The three left town before noon, guided by little more than rumor and a general direction. The woods grew denser the farther they went—less wild, more *watched*. Trees leaned in. Moss hung lower. Flowers bloomed out of season along their path.

A raven followed them for miles, silent and unblinking.

By dusk, they found the glade.

It was quiet and sun-dappled, despite the clouds overhead. A small cottage stood at its center—circular, overgrown with ivy and bone-white mushrooms, its chimney exhaling the scent of herbs and burnt lavender.

Wren touched the string of her bow. “This place isn’t wrong,” she said. “But it’s not right either.”

The door opened before they could knock.

A woman stood in the doorway—tall, with hair like fallen leaves and eyes like riverstone. She smiled, showing no teeth.

“You’ve brought your questions,” she said. “Good. I’ve been expecting you.”

The cottage interior smelled of sweet rot and old dreams—herbs hanging from the ceiling beams, bundles of bone and vine nestled in alcoves, jars of teeth and flowers resting side-by-side. The hearth crackled low, though no wood fed it.

Mother Verna moved like smoke, silent and slow. She offered no tea, no chair, only her gaze—cold and ancient behind a smile too smooth.

“You seek what festers beneath,” she said, circling them. “You dig into graves, old faiths, broken vows. You want to know what stirs in Greybarrow’s roots.”

“We want the truth,” Tarn said.

Verna stopped beside him. “Truth has a price.”

She held out a twisted staff, its top forked like a serpent’s tongue. “One secret from each of you—real and raw. In exchange, a vision. Not prophecy. Not fate. *Truth*—the kind you’ve forgotten or refused.”

Lira laughed, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “You’re not just an herbalist.”

Verna’s form shimmered.

Her skin took on a sickly green hue, her fingers lengthening into twisted claws. Her smile stretched impossibly wide, teeth sharpening into needles. Her true form rippled through the glamour—a green hag, veiled in illusion.

“I never said I was,” she rasped.

Wren drew her blade an inch from the sheath. “And if we say no?”

“Then you leave blind,” Verna replied. “And walk willingly into chains already fastened.”

They hesitated.

Then Tarn stepped forward. “My secret,” he said, voice steady. “I altered my master’s final design. Added a flaw to the seal he forged, out of pride. He never knew. The collapse was my fault.”

Verna inhaled deeply, savoring it. “A fine start.”

A shard of crystal appeared in the firelight. Inside, Tarn saw an image—a ruined forge he'd never entered, his mentor's ghost hammering alone in the dark.

Lira followed, smile fading. "I once framed a boy for theft. His name was Nerin. They sentenced him to seven years. He begged me to speak. I didn't."

Her shard showed the boy, older, staring out from behind prison bars. His eyes burned—not with hatred, but sorrow.

Finally, Wren. She didn't speak at first. Then, softly: "I left my brother behind. In the ruins. He screamed my name. I ran."

Her shard showed a flash of him—bruised, chained, but alive—beneath the chapel she'd fled.

Verna's voice oozed with pleasure. "Good. Now you may *see*."

The fire turned violet, and the walls melted away.

The walls of the cottage dissolved, not with noise but with *absence*. Light bent around the trio, and the floor beneath them was no longer wood but something deeper—black water that reflected nothing.

Each stood alone, surrounded by a silence that felt heavy enough to crush bone.

Lira was first.

She stood in a marketplace she barely remembered—dusty, loud, and warm. A younger her passed through the crowd, laughter on her lips, a pouch in her hand. Ahead, the boy: **Nerin**, no more than fifteen, shouting as guards seized him. His eyes met hers—betrayed, but not accusing.

She reached out, only to find him gone.

The vision faded.

Wren found herself in a broken chapel—too similar to Greybarrow's to ignore, but changed. Dark roots pushed through the altar, and the pews bled sap. In the corner, **her brother**—Gael—bound at wrist and ankle, bruised and bloodied, eyes wild with defiance.

He looked up, lips cracked.

"Wren?" he rasped. "You came back…"

Before she could answer, the image shattered like glass.

Tarn stood at a forge without flame, his hammer heavy in his hands. Before him: his old master, Thrunrik, hunched and silent, forging the same piece over and over, the metal always splitting. He turned, his face cracked with disappointment, and said only:

"You knew better."

Then the vision collapsed into darkness.

The trio stood again in Verna's cottage, the hearth guttering violet.

The hag leaned forward. "Take the pact," she purred. "One each. One binding in exchange for guidance. I will show you what lies beneath *all* of Greybarrow."

Wren shook her head, still pale. "No."

Tarn gripped his hammer. "We've seen enough."

Lira said nothing, her eyes on the floor.

Mother Verna sneered. "Then wander blind."

She dissolved into smoke—no flash, no scream—just gone, leaving only the faint smell of lilac and rot.

The hearth turned cold.

The visions remained.

They left Verna's glade without a word, the path behind them fading faster than it should. Even the raven that had shadowed them was gone. The forest pressed in with a weight the trees had not carried before.

By twilight, they reached a clearing marked on no map.

The **Pact Stone**.

Seven standing stones formed a rough circle, each one jagged, weatherworn, and etched with deep grooves—some filled with moss, others blackened with age. The air buzzed faintly here, like distant insects or the hum of iron just pulled from the forge.

Wren stepped carefully between the stones, bow lowered, her breath fogging despite the spring air.

"It's old," Tarn said, crouching to run a hand along one of the outer stones. "Older than Greybarrow. Maybe older than the mines."

"Or something was built over it," Lira muttered. "Something they tried to forget."

At the center of the circle lay a mound of stone and dirt, unnatural in shape. Wren knelt, pulled away the top layer of earth, and found a box—small, wood reinforced with iron, the hinges rusted to flakes.

She opened it slowly.

Inside lay a **rusted dagger**, its blade blackened, but the hilt was wrapped in old, bloodstained cloth. Beneath it, a pouch containing **thirty gold pieces**—dull coins stamped with symbols none of them recognized.

No wards. No curses. Just age and silence.

Wren stared at the dagger a long time before closing the box. “Leave it.”

Tarn shook his head gently and took the blade, wrapping it in oilcloth. “It has a story. Maybe a lesson.”

Lira pocketed the coins without a word.

As they left the circle, the humming ceased.

The stones were quiet again, but none of them felt alone.

Blackwater Hollow

The rain hadn’t stopped in two days. Greybarrow’s streets had turned to mud, and the river swelled against its banks, creeping toward the lowlands.

In the common room of *The Clay Tankard*, rumors rippled through firelight like steam: a floodplain farm south of the village—Darnell Hollow—had gone quiet. No deliveries. No carts. No word.

“Them animals turned,” muttered an old woman near the hearth. “Eyes like coal. Crops still growin’ though. That’s the worst of it. Ain’t natural.”

Another voice added, “Heard they sing, them Hollow folk. Nightsongs. Wrong ones.”

Wren listened, arms crossed. Tarn frowned, already halfway to packing his kit. Lira smirked. “A family that sings together slays together, is that it?”

By noon, they were crossing the floodplain—flat, boggy land, where rows of corn and root vegetables grew thick in the black soil. The farmstead sat at the heart of it, surrounded by still-growing crops despite the season’s rot and sky.

As they approached, the hairs on Wren’s arms rose.

The fields were lush, unnaturally so. No weeds. No pests. Rows too perfect, too uniform.

“Not even birds,” Tarn said quietly.

The farmhouse ahead stood still, smoke curling from the chimney. No animals in sight, but the windows flickered with candlelight… and something else.

A sound.

Soft and rhythmic, almost like humming.

Not one voice.

A chorus.

Too slow. Too sweet.

Too wrong.

The farmhouse door opened before they knocked.

A young woman stood framed in the entryway, her apron spotless, her hair braided with dried rosemary. Her smile was wide—too wide—and it didn't reach her eyes.

"Well bless my boots, we have guests today," she said, voice singsong and sweet. "Come in, come in—don't drift astray. You're cold and damp and much too thin. There's stew upon the fire within."

Wren's hand drifted to her blade. Lira raised an eyebrow.

The woman stepped aside without waiting for consent, and the scent of simmering herbs, meat, and something... floral wafted through the doorway.

Inside, the farmhouse was immaculate. Not lived-in—curated. Dried bundles of thistle and wild mint hung from every beam. The wooden floor gleamed. A fire crackled in the hearth, and a cast-iron pot bubbled gently on the hook.

Three others sat at the long table: a man with thick arms and a butcher's smile; a girl no older than ten, humming to herself and rocking; and an older woman with milky eyes, staring straight ahead and stirring a bowl that was already empty.

"Come, come," the girl sang. "Sit and eat, and rest your feet."

Tarn remained at the threshold. "We heard your trade had stopped."

The man at the table chuckled, rhythmic and measured. "Trade is trouble, and townsfolk fret. We've got enough, so no regret."

Lira moved slowly to the hearth, eyes on the stew. She sniffed it—too fragrant. Something earthy underneath the meat and herbs.

Wren leaned to whisper, "You smell that?"

"Mandrake," Lira replied. "And maybe... hemlock? Dried."

The girl clapped and grinned. “No more biting, no more cries. Just warm bellies and lullabies.”

The old woman tilted her head slowly. “They won’t leave unless they *eat*.”

Tarn’s grip tightened on his holy symbol.

Something was very, very wrong in this house.

The longer they stayed, the more the air thickened—not with smoke or stew, but with tension, stretched tight as a snarewire. The family continued their rhyming song, every line just slightly off meter, just slightly *wrong*.

Wren kept her hands free and her eyes moving. It wasn’t the stew, or the too-clean floor, or the unnatural silence outside that made her uneasy.

It was the rug.

A braided wool mat near the hearth—colorful, out of place, and slightly askew. As the others distracted the family, Wren stepped close and nudged it with the toe of her boot.

Beneath it, the wood was carved.

Not with decoration—but with symbols. Spirals that turned inward like eyes, runes resembling twisted chains, and one word, repeated again and again in curling strokes:

“The Below.”

She knelt, prying the rug back further, and found the outline of a hatch.

“Trapdoor,” she said, low.

Lira moved instantly to her side while Tarn stepped between the group and the family. “We have questions,” he said, his voice suddenly like stone. “Real ones.”

The humming stopped.

Wren pulled the hatch open with a creak and descended into the darkness with Lira behind her. The air below was cold and wet, the smell of mold and *meat* choking every breath.

The root cellar was carved into packed earth and stone. Hanging from hooks were animals—chickens, goats, and something that might have once been a boar. Each had its skin flayed in ritual patterns, symbols etched *into their flesh*, not after death, but as part of it.

Candles burned low in jars of cloudy oil, illuminating a central altar made of smooth black rock. Bones surrounded it—piled high and neat.

Carved into the wall above, smeared in blood and sap, were the words:

“We feed it so it sleeps.”

The moment Wren and Lira climbed back through the hatch, the room changed.

The girl's song fell to silence. The older woman stood—her bowl clattering to the floor—and reached into her apron, drawing a rusted sickle with stained cloth still wrapped around the hilt.

The man at the table chuckled again, lower now. "You shouldn't have gone below."

He rose, dragging a blacksmith's hammer from beneath the table. Behind him, the younger woman grabbed a carving knife and a fistful of thorns strung together with twine.

Tarn stepped between them. "You worship *it*."

The woman with the sickle smiled, wide and toothless. "It hungers. It listens. We feed it the quiet ones."

Then they lunged.

The room exploded into chaos—table overturned, stew pot shattered across the floor, embers scattering. The tight space turned every swing into a gamble.

The older woman came at Tarn, shrieking as she swung the sickle—he blocked with his shield and smashed his warhammer down, dropping her in a single, awful blow.

Lira moved like water, disarming the girl with the thorns before she could finish her chant. She flipped the knife from the woman's hand and kicked her into the wall, where she crumpled, groaning.

Wren tangled with the girl—the child—who tried to bite, claw, and finally just run. Wren caught her by the wrist.

They locked eyes.

And Wren let her go.

The girl bolted out the door, vanishing into the rain-soaked fields.

Tarn grappled with the last—the hammer-wielding man—and the two crashed into the hearth. Flames surged, shadows danced. Tarn roared and struck once, twice, until the man went still.

Then it was quiet again, save for the hiss of the fire and the distant, rhythmic chant still echoing in the soil.

Lira found a hidden drawer in the pantry floor: a locked coffer containing 70 gold pieces in mismatched coinage—some local, some ancient, some with the eye-insignia of *The Below*.

She held up the pouch. "Blood buys good silence."

Tarn ignored her. He carried the bodies out one by one—those who could not be saved—and buried them at the edge of the field, beneath the storm-heavy sky.

He said no prayers.

Some things didn't deserve words.

Beneath the Roots

The sky had not cleared since Blackwater Hollow. Rain hung in the air without falling, and the clouds churned with the weight of things unspoken.

From the journals and carvings uncovered beneath the farmhouse, one phrase repeated again and again:

"The Heartwood hides the breath of Below."

Locals only spoke of it in mutters—an ancient tree deep in the hills, untouched by lightning or axe. None dared mark its path, but Lira found the way regardless. Runes etched into fence posts, knot-forms in barn doors, seed pouches buried in ash—all **guides** in code. She understood such things. Lies hidden in plain sight.

They reached it by dusk.

The Heartwood Tree stood alone on a rise above the valley—its trunk as wide as a barn, bark ridged like ribs, and limbs so high they disappeared into mist. No birds perched on its branches. No roots broke the surface.

Until they looked closer.

At the tree's base, the roots curled outward in a spiral, twisted into unnatural symmetry. Wren stepped forward, running her fingers along a tangle of bark—and felt a breeze, warm and fetid, rising from beneath.

"There," she said. "A hollow."

Lira knelt beside her, brushing aside a veil of moss to reveal an arched opening just large enough to crawl through.

Tarn pressed his hand to the trunk. The wood pulsed beneath his palm, faint but steady—like a heartbeat buried deep in soil.

"No tools made this," he murmured. "The earth pulled away on its own."

Without another word, they slipped inside.

The tunnel wound downward, swallowing them in roots and damp air. Earth pressed close on all sides, and the light faded behind them until only the faint glow of moss and their own torches lit the way.

Somewhere ahead, stone waited.

And silence was no longer their companion.

The tunnels deepened quickly, the soil becoming packed stone veined with roots that pulsed faintly with warmth. The passage curved in unnatural arcs, neither following natural strata nor tool-cut lines. It felt *grown*—like the earth itself had formed a passage in imitation of architecture.

Moss clung to the walls in patches, glowing faintly green. Here and there, bits of broken pottery, iron fittings, or fossilized bone jutted from the wall, half-swallowed by time.

"Not dwarven," Tarn whispered, trailing his fingers along the stone. "This wasn't shaped. This was *fed*."

They came upon a widening in the tunnel—a chamber barely ten feet wide, its walls etched with carvings.

Lira stepped forward first, torch raised. "Not recent," she said. "Older than the chapel. Older than the town."

She brushed dirt away from the nearest carving, revealing script—curved, flowing, sharp at the ends.

Draconic.

She read aloud slowly, translating as she went. "'The Bound Hunger stirs beneath unworthy roots… Chains of word and will hold fast... but not forever.'"

Wren frowned. "I thought you said this wasn't a dragon site."

"It's not," Lira replied. "There are no depictions—no wings, no flame. Just warnings."

Another etching showed figures bent in prayer, heads bowed toward a void in the stone. No mouths. No eyes. Just silence.

Tarn stepped closer, expression grim. "This isn't faith. It's surrender."

Beneath the central image, one phrase had been scratched more recently—crude, fresh compared to the rest:

"We sang it free."

The torchlight flickered, as if something *breathed* in time with the words.

The tunnels deepened, twisting like veins beneath the skin of the world. The carved warnings gave way to silence, and that silence became *oppressive*. Even their breath seemed muffled in the thick air.

The first danger was nearly invisible—a patch of pale-green moss that released a cloud of spores when disturbed. Lira coughed and pulled her cloak over her mouth, eyes watering.

“Spore-rot,” Tarn said. “Don’t breathe it in.”

They skirted it carefully, but further ahead, the path narrowed, blocked in part by gnarled roots that twisted down from the ceiling like the fingers of a giant’s hand. As Wren pushed past one, it twitched.

Too late.

The roots lashed out, wrapping around her legs, dragging her back toward a crack in the wall. She slashed at them with a dagger, but they coiled tighter, hissing sap.

“Tarn!” she shouted.

He barreled forward, driving his hammer into the mass. The roots splintered with a wet crack, ichor spraying the tunnel walls. But the moment he pulled her free, the ceiling shuddered.

The tunnel groaned like something alive—and began to collapse.

Wren hit the ground hard, scrambling toward the exit. Tarn shoved her forward, just as the ceiling gave way behind them.

Stone crashed down, dust exploding outward.

When it cleared, Tarn lay motionless beneath a thick root that had speared through his shoulder. Blood soaked his tunic. His hammer was buried beneath rubble.

“Tarn!” Wren cried, dragging him free.

Lira pressed cloth to the wound, grimacing. “He’s breathing. Barely.”

Tarn blinked through the pain, eyes focusing slowly. “Still here,” he grunted.

They sat in silence for a long moment, the dust settling like ash.

“Next time,” Wren said quietly, “I’ll go first.”

Tarn managed a faint smile. “Deal.”

The roots twitched once more… but this time, they *withdrew*.

Something ahead knew they were coming.

The tunnel leveled at last, widening into a hollowed-out sanctum deep beneath the Heartwood.

The chamber was wrong in shape—round, yes, but subtly off, as if the walls had grown by will rather than tool. Roots webbed across the ceiling, pulsing faintly with slow, sullen light.

At its center stood an altar of bone—meticulously assembled, each piece bleached and shaped to form a slab atop a pile of skulls. No dust lay on it. No cobwebs. The place was tended.

And guarding it: armor.

Polished iron. No occupant. No breath.

It stood motionless beside the altar, two hands resting on the pommel of a blade driven into the stone floor. The helm turned slightly as they entered, joints creaking—not with rust, but with *intent*.

Animated.

"Watchful construct," Tarn said, already raising his hammer. "It won't speak. Only judge."

The armor stepped forward, blade rising.

Wren fired twice—both arrows glanced off its chestplate. Lira darted behind it, searching for a gap. None. This wasn't forged armor—it was shaped, built to move *without* a man.

It brought its sword down toward Tarn.

He met it mid-swing, hammer colliding with steel. Sparks lit the chamber. The armor reeled.

With a roar, Tarn drove his warhammer up into its helm—once, then again—until the entire form collapsed inward, folding like paper as its enchantment shattered.

Silence returned.

At the back of the chamber sat a small iron coffer, chained and sealed with a brittle lock. Lira picked it clean in seconds, revealing:

- 60 gold pieces in ancient mint
- A single flawless ruby, deep red, glinting even in dim torchlight (worth 50 gp)

Lira held it up to the torchlight, admiring it. "Now *this* is worth lying for."

Wren took the gem gently from her, wrapped it in cloth, and tucked it into her pack.

"We give it to the temple," she said. "After all this—Greybarrow needs it more than we do."

No one argued.

They left the sanctum behind, shadows long behind them.

And above, the Heartwood stood silent—listening.

The Broken Mask

The road into Greybarrow had barely dried from the last storm when a **rider** arrived.

He wore silver trim on his blue cloak, a pin in the shape of a hawk's wing affixed at his collar. His horse was lean and expensive, unsuited for the mud of the borderlands. And his words, delivered to the barkeep at *The Clay Tankard*, were simple and sharp:

"I am seeking the Lady Lira of House Thorne. I believe she is traveling under false name or no name at all."

The inn quieted as if a bell had been struck.

Tarn looked up from his stew. Wren froze mid-step. Lira—standing by the hearth, half-shadowed by the fire—did not turn.

But her hand tightened around the stem of her cup.

"Didn't know we had nobility," Branna muttered under her breath. "And I know *everyone* in this town."

The emissary turned slowly, surveying the room with the blank patience of someone used to obedience.

"Lady Thorne," he said again, louder this time. "You have debts. And enemies. And one who waits to see you return—willing or not."

Wren stepped forward. "We don't know any 'Lady Thorne.'"

Lira spoke then, her voice calm. "No need to lie for me."

She turned to face the room, her face unreadable.

"I'm not a lady," she said. "Never was. But someone out there still wants to believe the lie I once told."

The emissary's eyes narrowed. "So you admit your identity."

"I admit *a lot*," Lira said. "But not to you."

Tarn stood slowly. "She's with us now. That's all that matters."

But the name was out.
Thorne.
And names, once spoken, could not be taken back.

They found quiet in the alley behind *The Clay Tankard*, where the inn's walls muffled the weight of staring eyes and whispered names. The emissary had left—for now—promising to return with writs and men.

Lira leaned against a damp brick wall, the silver pin he'd worn still burned into her memory.

Wren stood opposite her, arms folded. Not angry. Just watching.

Tarn sat on a barrel nearby, silent, letting the moment stretch long enough for honesty to breathe.

"I need to know," Wren said softly. "Because I've trusted you at my back."

"Didn't ask you to," Lira snapped. But then her shoulders sagged. "I didn't want this to catch up. I thought... out here, it couldn't."

Tarn just waited.

She looked at the sky—gray, indifferent—and spoke.

"Seven years ago, I posed as a noblewoman's daughter—*Lady Lira of House Thorne*—at a midsummer gala in Daggerford. I wore her family's colors, had a forged crest, and spun stories for coin. It was good work. I was *very* convincing."

Her smile was bitter.

"One boy—Nerin—believed I was everything I pretended to be. He stole from the estate for me. Letters, seals, silver. I told him it was for love. When they found out, I ran."

She looked away.

"He didn't."

Tarn exhaled slowly. "And he's still paying for your lie?"

Lira nodded.

"Seven years," she said. "Prison. Maybe more."

Wren stepped closer. "And now they think you're *her*. You could disappear."

"I could," Lira said. "And I've done it before."

She looked between them. "But if I run now, I'll never stop."

Tarn stood. "Then don't. Make it mean something."

For once, Lira didn't smile.

"I'll try."

He found her at dusk, on the edge of Greybarrow's south road, where the wind carried mist in slow, heavy drifts. The emissary waited with the same unnerving patience, perched on his too-clean horse, gloves folded neatly over his saddle horn.

"You came alone," he noted, as Lira approached.

"Seems to be the way of things," she said. Her voice had no edge tonight—just weariness.

He dismounted with care, the movement practiced. From his satchel, he withdrew a folded parchment, sealed with a wax stamp shaped like a hawk devouring a snake.

"I don't care about your sins," he said. "Only your silence."

He handed her the letter.

To the bearer: Fifty gold coins upon confirmation of the whereabouts of the other two. Additional reward if they are delivered alive, unaware of the hand that betrayed them.

She stared at the page for a long time.

"They're not who I'm after," the emissary added. "Just liabilities. Loose ends tied to yours. Cut them loose, and your slate goes clean."

Lira said nothing.

He waited, then mounted again. "You've walked in lies for years. One more won't matter."

Then he was gone.

Lira stood alone in the fog, the parchment heavy in her hand.

She didn't burn it. She folded it neatly and slipped it into her pack, next to the stolen locket, the forged ring, the coin she didn't earn.

Later, back in the inn, she sat by the fire across from Wren and Tarn, neither of whom asked where she'd gone.

And for the first time since she joined them, Lira didn't smile.

The town hall's records room was colder than it should've been. Dust clung to every ledger like lichen, and the oil lamp Wren carried flickered as if resisting the weight of the knowledge pressed between the pages.

She'd asked for access under pretense—searching local birth rolls, she claimed. No one questioned her. After all, the village trusted silence more than truth.

She moved past property logs, burial counts, census scraps. Then she found it:
"Chapel Subterranean Incidents – Record of Losses"
A single page, half-torn, tucked into a folder labeled *Mines: Closed Holdings.*

The handwriting was cramped and rushed. Names were listed in columns, numbers beside them, not dates. Some had symbols she didn't recognize—spirals, tally marks, a chain icon drawn in red ink.

Her fingers stopped halfway down the page.

"Gael Hollowfall – Male, 13 – Missing (Rites Interrupted)"

No burial. No return. No conclusion.

Her brother. *Not dead.*

Not officially.

Wren read the name again. And again.

Her lips didn't move. Her hands didn't shake. But something behind her eyes changed.

She rolled the paper gently and slid it into her satchel.

That night, she sat in the common room with Tarn and Lira, neither speaking much, the fire burning low. The emissary had gone. The town was quiet.

Lira stared into her cup. Tarn dozed lightly, still favoring his shoulder.

And Wren stared into the flames, her face unreadable.

Not grief.
Not hope.
Just *resolve*.

Emberfall

They found it at dawn, where the forest broke into an ashen clearing. No birds sang. No insects stirred. Even the mist, ever-present in Greybarrow's woods, avoided the place entirely.

The chapel rose from the blackened earth like a tombstone—its once-white stone scorched and cracked, its steeple collapsed, leaving a jagged wound in the roof. The old iron bell hung at an angle, melted partly down one side, frozen mid-chime.

Tarn ran his hand along the outer wall. The stone flaked beneath his touch. "Burned from the inside," he said. "Not by fire… by something *older*."

Wren stepped carefully, noting the scorched ground—a perfect ring, blackened to dry clay. No new growth. No moss. The earth had been drained, not just burned.

“They say this is where the last priest went to die,” Lira murmured. “The one who stayed behind when the others fled.”

She nodded toward the door—still sealed with rusted chains and a heavy bar, smeared in the same waxy black resin they’d seen in the root cellar.

“No one's opened it in over a decade.”

Wren didn’t hesitate.

She knelt, cutting through the last of the binding with her blade, and together, they pushed the doors open.

A rush of **dry air** hit them—hot, still, and heavy with the smell of incense long since turned to dust.

Inside, the chapel waited. Silent.

And something within had not yet finished speaking.

The chapel’s sanctuary was long dead, but something within it still breathed.

Where once pews stood in neat, holy rows, now lay **cinders** and warped beams. The altar, once carved of polished stone, was cracked down the center like a broken tooth. Ash coated everything—walls, ceiling, bones crushed beneath fallen timber.

And at the heart of it all, chained atop the altar itself, was a man.

Bare-chested, gaunt, and half-covered in ash, he lay bound at the wrists and ankles with blackened iron. His skin bore the same spiraling carvings they’d seen in the root sanctum—etched by hand, or worse. Tubes of root and sinew twisted into the stone beneath him, pulsing faintly. The air around him shimmered, as if held in place by something that hated to let go.

Tarn stepped forward but stopped. “He’s alive.”

Lira crouched, examining the altar’s edge. “Barely. He hasn’t moved in days… maybe years.”

Wren approached last.

The man stirred.

Eyes fluttered open—dry, red-rimmed, unfocused. His lips parted, and a rasp came out, barely a word.

“...Wren...?”

She froze.

Her sword dropped to her side, forgotten.

“Gael?” she whispered.

His gaze found hers. For a second, he smiled. Or tried to.

“You came back.”

Tears welled but didn’t fall. Her voice cracked. “I thought you were gone. I thought I left you there to die.”

“You did,” he said.

Then his eyes rolled back, and the chapel trembled—subtle, but rising.

Something in the foundations did not want him freed.

Tarn knelt at the altar, chanting softly under his breath, hands pressed to the blackened chains. They pulsed faintly beneath his palms, resisting—not physically, but willfully, as though bound by something deeper than steel.

“Whatever’s holding him,” Tarn said, voice strained, “it isn’t just magic. It’s *memory*.”

Wren brushed soot from her brother’s face, her blade trembling as she brought it down on one of the restraints. The iron screamed as it split.

That was the first crack.

The second chain snapped under Tarn’s warhammer.

The third—shattered by Lira’s boot and dagger.

When the final link broke, the altar shuddered, and the chapel floor groaned. Stone split at the seams, and the ash rose in swirling spirals as if pulled into a breathless wind.

From the wreckage at the sanctuary's rear, something assembled itself.

Bits of broken statues—saints, martyrs, forgotten idols—whirled upward, fusing with relics, bones, melted candleholders, even fragments of stained glass. It formed a towering figure, faceless, robed in smoke and soot, its joints glowing with emberlight.

A guardian, born not of worship, but of betrayal and shame.

Tarn backed away, dragging Gael down behind the altar. “It’s tied to the binding. The act of breaking them woke it!”

The statue advanced, slow but relentless. A staff made from shattered pews rose in its hands.

It struck first—sweeping Lira across the floor with a single swing. She rolled to her feet, lip bleeding, knives already back in hand.

Wren loosed arrow after arrow into its chest. They splintered on impact.

“Go for the joints!” Tarn shouted.

He met it head-on, hammer crackling with radiant energy, striking the thing’s leg with a roar. Bone and brass exploded outward—but the statue didn’t fall. Instead, it grabbed Tarn and hurled him across the room. He crashed through a beam, groaning as he slid to the floor.

Lira climbed its back, driving a blade into the base of its neck—finding a knot of blackened relics fused in a clump. She twisted.

The statue howled.

Wren took her shot—an arrow to the joint Lira exposed.

The guardian staggered. Tarn rose again, blood in his beard, and hurled his hammer with both hands. It struck the guardian in the chest—

—and the relic-heart shattered.

The statue collapsed in pieces, falling with a sound like the end of a funeral.

The silence that followed was real.

And earned.

Gael was alive—but hollow.

His eyes followed movement, but not meaning. Words came, then vanished like breath in cold air. Whatever force had kept him chained to the altar had eaten more than flesh. It had gnawed through memory, through time, through self.

Wren held him close, brushing soot from his hair. He didn’t cry. Neither did she.

Behind them, the chapel creaked, the wounds in its stone bleeding smoke and heat. The remains of the guardian lay in shards, faintly glowing. Root-veins in the walls twisted and shriveled, pulling back like a dying hand.

Tarn scattered a circle of salt and oil around the altar. One match, and the blaze took fast.

The sanctuary burned—not in fury, but in release. The flames were gold and red, curling high into the dawn as the first light broke through the trees.

They walked away without looking back.

Greybarrow awoke slowly that morning, under skies that—for the first time in weeks—held no clouds.

When the party returned, they were not greeted with cheers or flowers. Just quiet nods, eyes full of questions, and a silence that somehow felt lighter than the one before.

They brought Gael to the temple. He would be cared for.

Tarn handed the last of their coin—50 gold pieces recovered from beneath the sanctuary—to the town elder. “Use it for the well,” he said. “And the chapel. You’ll need new stones.”

Wren stood at the edge of the square, watching her brother sit in the sun.

Lira said nothing. She burned the bounty letter in the inn’s hearth that night, then stayed to watch the flames until they were only embers.

They had gone looking for the truth, and they’d found it.

Not treasure. Not glory.

Just ashes, and the chance to begin again.

The Quiet Wake

Greybarrow had been broken before the darkness rose—but now, something in it had cracked clean through.

And still, it endured.

Within days of the chapel’s fall, townsfolk began hauling stone and timber from collapsed barns and unused sheds. Tools long rusted were oiled. Nails were straightened. Branna opened her back room to carpenters. No one asked for orders. No one waited to be told.

The well was the first to be cleared. Then the square was swept. The space where the old chapel had stood was cordoned by rope and chalk symbols Tarn marked by hand.

The town breathed again—not deeply, but it was breath nonetheless.

Wren watched from the steps of the newly consecrated shrine, a makeshift altar of old pew planks and river stones Tarn had arranged himself.

Beside her, **Gael** moved slowly across the grass. His gait was even, but his head tilted with every sound—a door creaking, a bird taking flight, the toll of a handbell used to mark the noon meal. At each chime, his shoulders stiffened. At any spark, he flinched.

He didn’t speak much. Some days not at all.

But he stayed close to Wren, like a branch unsure it had survived the fire.

She said little, only nodded when he looked her way. She did not push. She knew, better than anyone, that wounds born in the dark did not heal under pressure.

They simply… learned to stay quiet.

A breeze passed through the square, warm for the season. Children played near the baker's stall. A new coat of paint brightened the inn's shutters.

And still, the wind carried a faint scent of ash.

Wren closed her eyes.

She didn't believe in happy endings.

But beginnings—beginnings were something she could live with.

Tarn rose before the sun.

The villagers often saw him in the half-light, hammer in hand—not the one he used for battle, but a mason's tool, worn smooth from old calluses. He worked quietly, with the rhythm of someone who'd spent more of his life shaping than destroying.

Each morning, he returned to the chapel site, now cleared to bare earth. He arranged the stones they salvaged into foundations. Placed them. Adjusted. Then sat in silence, his eyes closed, breath even.

A kind of prayer, perhaps—but not to Moradin. Not to anyone.

At first, the villagers gave him space.

Then they started to watch. One by one, they brought offerings: nails, scrap wood, bundles of herbs, parchment with sketches of the old steeple. They asked nothing. Left him alone.

Then came the first question:
"Will you bless the well when it's finished?"

He hesitated before answering. "I can speak words. I don't know if they count."

Another:
"Can you name the baby born last week? The temple's gone…"

He blinked. "I'm no priest."

But he did it.

Soon, they called him Brother Tarn, whether he corrected them or not.

Wren smirked when she heard it, once. Lira called him "Father Stone" for a day, until he threw a wet rag at her and returned to his work.

He didn’t wear vestments. He never preached.

But each stone he laid was placed with care. Each breath he took beside the cracked altar was a prayer he didn’t know he was saying.

He had built for gods once.

Now he built for people.

And in that quiet, unfinished sanctuary, faith began to return—not from a sermon, but from sweat and patience.

Tarn still resented it.

But he stayed.

Lira hadn’t stepped inside a jail since the night she’d walked free while someone else paid the price.

Greybarrow’s jail was little more than two cells, a desk, and a tired constable named Harven who smelled faintly of soap and mushrooms. He recognized her at once.

“Not in trouble, are you?” he asked, half-joking, half-curious.

“Not yet,” she replied, flashing a weak smile. “I’m looking for a name.”

She gave it softly**: Nerin Hallas.** A name she hadn’t spoken aloud in years.

Harven raised an eyebrow, rummaged through a ledger bound in twine, and thumbed through the entries.

“Hallas… Daggerford charges, seven years past. Document says he served his term. Released spring last year. Papers say he didn’t return to the city.”

“Where did he go?”

Harven shrugged. “Didn’t say. Records show he left alone. Quiet. No baggage. Took a coat and coin from the lockbox and walked out.”

Lira stood still, arms folded.

“You his sister or something?” Harven asked.

She shook her head. “I was the reason he went in.”

Harven didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

She left without another word, the weight in her chest heavier than when she’d arrived.

That night, she wrote a letter. She didn't know where to send it—only that it needed to be written. Ink soaked the page as she confessed everything: the lie, the silence, the coin. She offered no apology. Just truth.

She folded it neatly and left it on the chapel altar at dawn.

When she returned at dusk, it was gone.

No one saw who took it.

But someone had.

The Root That Remains

The snow had melted, but the earth beneath one corner of Eddric Long's farm stayed cold.

At first, he thought nothing of it. Fields took time to wake after a hard season. But spring had returned everywhere *else*. Crocuses bloomed, bees buzzed drunkenly through the hedgerows—and yet, a stretch no wider than a cartwheel near his old well remained frozen stiff and lifeless.

The grass there had turned black. Not with mold or rot—just... dead. As if drained.

And this morning, he saw something new.

A spiral, faint but precise, etched into the frost covering the patch. It hadn't been there the night before. No footstep led to it, and no rake or tool could've made such clean curves.

It *whispered*, too—so soft he thought it wind at first. But when he knelt to listen, he heard the sound clearly.

Not words. Just breath.

And beneath the breath: movement.

He dug a little, just to be sure. Barely beneath the soil, a root, pale and soft, pulsed in the dirt—warm to the touch.

He burned it. Doused the patch with salt and ash.

And still, when he looked again at dusk, the spiral had returned—cleaner this time.

He didn't go back after dark.

But he started sleeping with a knife near his bed.

Just in case the root remembered the way *up*.

Wren arrived at the farm at dawn, unannounced and quiet. Eddric met her with pale eyes and a wary nod. He didn't ask why she'd come.

She walked the field in silence, boots crunching through the frost-laced grass until she found the patch—blacker now, wider than Eddric had described, and ringed in a second spiral she knew hadn't been there before.

No animals neared it. Even birds avoided the fence posts nearby.

Wren crouched and pressed her palm flat to the earth.

It was warm.

Not season-warm, not sun-warm—*body* warm. She felt it thrum beneath her fingers, like something dreaming just under the surface.

She unslung her dagger and began to dig.

Six inches down, the blade struck metal.

She cleared it with care, breathing shallow.

What she uncovered was small—half a foot long, rusted, and black with age—but unmistakable: a chain link, wide and oval, its edges carved with a single spiral rune.

The same kind of chain that had held her brother to the altar beneath Emberfall.

She stared at it for a long time.

It wasn't glowing. It wasn't cursed. It was just *there*.

She reburied it without a word. Repacked the soil. Smoothed the frost.

Then she stood, turned, and walked away.

She said nothing to Tarn. Nothing to Lira. Not even to Eddric.

But that night, she slept with a blade tucked beneath her pillow.

And she dreamed of stone altars.
And roots that remembered her name.

The wind howled through Greybarrow that night—not a storm, but something thinner. Stranger. As if the trees themselves had learned to breathe in words.

Wren lay awake, staring at the ceiling of the small cottage beside the rebuilt chapel. The hearth had long since dimmed. Gael slept in the cot across the room, curled tight beneath woolen blankets, brow furrowed as though even rest pressed too hard.

He hadn't spoken all day. Hadn't needed to.

But near midnight, he stirred.

Wren turned toward him, sensing the shift before it came.

Gael's mouth opened—not wide, not gasping. Just a whisper, soft and hoarse, like leaves rasping across old stone.

"Not sealed..."

Wren sat up slowly.

His eyes were closed. His breath steady. But his lips moved again.

"...Not yet."

Then silence.

She didn't move for a long time.

Outside, the wind carried no birdsong. No crickets. Only the sound of something shifting under the earth—*slowly waking.*

Wren lay back, eyes open in the dark.

She didn't sleep again that night.

The Letter Unsent

The candle burned low beside her, wax dripping onto a page half-filled with ink and hesitation.

Lira sat alone in her rented loft above *The Clay Tankard*, the shutters cracked just enough to let in the sound of wind sweeping the rooftops. She hadn't lit a fire. Cold felt more honest.

The letter had no heading. No date. Just a name scratched in the corner like a wound that hadn't scarred right:

Nerin.

She stared at the word for a long time before writing more. Slowly, carefully—like each line might split her open.

I don't know where you are, or if you'll ever read this. Maybe it's selfish of me to write it at all.

I lied to you. Lied with every breath, every smile, every promise. I told you I was someone—noble, clever, generous. I made you believe we were a team. I told you I loved you.

She paused. Dipped the quill again. Her hand didn't shake. She wished it would.

You stole for me. You bled for me. And I watched them take you because I was too proud to confess.

I could say I was scared. I could say I was just trying to survive. But we both know that's not really it.

I was good at lying. Still am. That's the part I hate most.

Lira stopped again.

The wind picked up outside, rattling the window latch. She could hear Wren returning below, her boots scraping the floorboards. A familiar weight settled in her chest—guilt with nowhere to go.

I'm not a lady. I was never part of House Thorne. I've stolen names the way I steal coin—quick and without remorse. But yours… I never should've taken yours.

You didn't deserve that.

She stared at the last line.

Then she wrote one more.

And I know that saying it now won't ever make it right.

Dawn came muted and gray, sky heavy with unshed rain. The village was still asleep when Lira stepped outside, letter folded neatly and sealed with a drop of candle wax pressed flat beneath her thumb.

She wore no cloak, no pack. Just boots still damp from the night before and the quiet weight of what she carried.

The chapel's frame was rising slowly—stone by stone, beam by beam—but the altar had already been placed. Tarn had insisted on it. A solid piece of oak, unpolished but honest, it stood beneath the skeleton of the open rafters like a promise not yet spoken.

No one was there when she arrived.

She climbed the steps in silence, boots muffled by the morning mist. At the altar, she hesitated. Not from fear—but from the strange emptiness that came when words were done, and only consequence remained.

She laid the letter on the altar, just off-center. Not hidden. Not offered. Just placed.

She didn't say a prayer.

Didn’t look up.

Didn’t stay.

When she walked away, she didn’t glance back.

Some confessions weren’t meant to be heard.

Just left where they could finally stop following.

By midday, the chapel grounds bustled again.

Tarn hauled timber beside two volunteers from the mill. Wren sharpened tools beneath the eaves, pausing now and then to watch Gael trace careful shapes into the dirt with a stick—spirals, mostly. Always spirals.

Lira didn’t return until near dusk.

She told herself she was just passing by, just checking the scaffolding. Nothing more.

But her eyes drifted to the altar.

It sat in quiet dignity beneath the half-framed roof, sunlight streaking across its surface. Dust motes floated like ash in the beams. Birds sang in the rafters above, nesting in places they hadn’t before.

And the letter was gone.

No page. No wax. No trace.

Lira stepped closer, scanning the area out of habit.

No burn marks. No wind-drift. The papers on the nearby table hadn’t moved. No one had worked inside the chapel since morning.

She didn’t ask Tarn if he’d seen anything.

She didn’t tell Wren what she’d left.

She simply stood there for a moment, fingers resting on the edge of the altar, the wood warm beneath her skin.

It hadn’t been forgiveness.

But it had been *heard*.

Somewhere.

And that was enough to make her feel—briefly—like someone closer to real.

The moon hung low over Greybarrow that night, a thin crescent like a knife drawn halfway from its sheath.

Lira returned to her loft late, boots slick with dew, the scent of cut pine still on her gloves from helping Tarn raise the chapel's new frame. Her muscles ached in unfamiliar ways—honest labor, not the kind earned by sleight of hand.

She lit no candle. The dark felt comfortable again.

But when she stepped into her room, she paused.

The window was open.

Just an inch. Just enough.

She crossed the floor slowly. Her eyes adjusted fast, trained by years of darkness.

The coin sat on her pillow.

Alone. Deliberate.

Not just any coin—one of the stolen ones. She recognized the nick in the edge, the off-center stamp from the noble's vault. It had been part of the hoard Nerin took for her, the one that paid for her escape and bought his chains.

It hadn't been in her pack.

Hadn't been in town.

She picked it up. It was cold.

Then her gaze drifted to the window frame above her bed.

Weeks ago, she'd carved her alias there in a fit of arrogance—or maybe a need to make the lie feel like it belonged.

Lira Thorne, etched in careful, showy letters.

Now?

Scratched out.

Rough gouges tore through every letter. Not by knife, but nail. Deliberate. Slow.

She stood for a long time.

No fear. No threat. Just... understanding.

Someone knew.

And someone had answered.

Lira pocketed the coin. She left the name as it was.

She wouldn't carve another.

Not yet.

Ashes in Bloom

Spring came late to Greybarrow that year, as if unsure it was welcome.

But when it came, it came all at once.

The frost lifted from the fields. The black patches near wells and fenceposts faded to brown, then green. Wildflowers bloomed in strange, stubborn places—between stones, beneath windows, and at the edges of the square where blood had dried only months before.

The Heartwood Tree, once a looming presence of dread, stood changed.

Its bark had sloughed off completely over the course of a single week, peeling away like parchment burned from the inside. What remained was smooth and pale, still massive, but no longer sick with tension. The spiral ridges had softened, and new shoots—thin and curling—pushed up around the base like children reaching for a mother's hand.

Tarn visited it once and laid a single stone at its base. He said no words. He simply listened.

Wren stood beneath it days later, watching the light move through the branches. No voices. No wind. Just silence—and this time, it felt clean.

Gael walked circles around the base now, touching the new leaves, whispering nonsense to the sprouts. He didn't scream when birds called anymore.

And Lira, when she passed the tree, never looked directly at it. But her hand always hovered near the new growth, fingers brushing the air as if checking for heat that had finally gone out.

What had grown from rot still held memory.

But memory, if tended, could flower.

They called it a feast, though it was closer to a shared table—fresh loaves, smoked trout from the river, early greens from the hollow, and stew bubbling in borrowed pots. Tarn oversaw the fire with quiet satisfaction, sleeves rolled up and beard braided in temple-thread, though he still refused to wear a robe.

The tables circled the chapel's new frame, half-built but proud. Lanterns swung from the beams, and children darted between the posts, laughing loud enough to chase away the last of the shadows.

Wren stood near the rebuilt well, Gael seated beside her, a plate untouched in his lap. He was watching the sky—something in the wind had caught his interest.

Tarn clanged a spoon to a pan.

The crowd hushed.

"We've rebuilt before," he said. "We'll rebuild again. But we don't stand here because we're unbreakable. We stand because we chose not to be left behind."

There were nods. Smiles. A few raised mugs.

Then Wren stepped forward.

No one asked her to.

She didn't speak loudly. She didn't raise her hands.

But every head turned.

"This place—what it was, what it saw—it's still here," she said. "In the stone. In the roots. In us."

She looked around the crowd—at Branna, at the smith's widow, at the boy who once feared the chapel's bell.

"It didn't take us. We're still here."

That was all.

But it was enough.

Applause came slow. Then stronger.

And Lira—leaning against the tavern's wall, arms crossed, wine in hand—smiled.

But her back stayed to the road.

Some instincts die slowly.

The fire in *The Clay Tankard* burned low. Most of the town had gone to sleep with full bellies and lighter hearts. Lira played cards half-heartedly with a merchant's son; Tarn dozed with a mug in hand, his snoring as steady as a forge's rhythm. Wren sat near the window, watching Gael draw loops on the glass with his fingertip.

The door opened.

No bell, no knock.

Just a man.

Thin. Sunken. Silent. His robes were scorched, the hems black with soot, sleeves frayed to thread. He carried no pack. No blade. Only a staff carved from ashwood, twisted as if grown wrong, the top wrapped in burned leather straps.

Branna looked up from behind the counter, her hand halfway to the mug she'd been drying.

The man didn't greet.

He didn't smile.

He simply stepped forward and asked, voice dry as parchment:

"Where did they bury the chain?"

The inn went still.

Even the fire seemed to quiet.

Branna, to her credit, didn't flinch. She set the mug down slowly. Her eyes flicked toward Wren. Then Tarn. Then the man again.

"I wouldn't ask that here," she said.

The man smiled—just slightly. Not pleased. Just *knowing*.

He turned and stepped back into the dark.

Outside, the wind that had carried spring so gently through Greybarrow shifted.

It smelled like ash again.

And beneath it—roots moved.